Looking Up to *Shane*

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The clash of his armor rings mellow and heroic, down the ages into our modern ears.
—Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1895)

As the child's mind was growing into knowledge, his mind was growing into memory.
—George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (1861)

To say that George Stevens's *Shane* has a troubled place in the canon of westerns (let alone the wider canon of Hollywood cinema) would be something of an understatement. Let me offer a brief outline of the film before addressing my central concern. Stevens made *Shane* in 1953 for Paramount Pictures as part of a four-picture deal to save face (and money) following the failure of Liberty Films, which he co-founded with William Wyler and Frank Capra (who became president of the company).[1] Of the three pictures Stevens made for Paramount after the War, two were major hits: *A Place in the Sun* (1951) won him a Best Director Oscar, while *Shane* earned several nominations, including Best Picture and Director, Best Supporting Actor (Jack Palance and Brandon de Wilde), and Best Story and Screenplay (A. B. Guthrie, Jr.).[2] Loyal Griggs won for Best Cinematography. It is little wonder that the film was celebrated for its photography, given that Griggs and Stevens shot much of the drama at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, on gorgeous locations framed by the Grand Tetons. Against this magnificent backdrop Stevens introduces Shane (Alan Ladd), a mysterious gunslinger who rides in from the mountains, watched (all the way) by little Joey Starrett (De Wilde), whose parents, Joe (Van Heflin) and Marian (Jean Arthur) struggle to farm their claim under pressure from a bullying rancher, Rufus Ryker (Emile Meyer), who, along with his brother (John Dierkes) and henchmen, attempts to either buy off or drive out the homesteaders to keep the open range open (that is, for his own use). The film is set in 1890 as the West was rapidly shrinking in the wake of the Homestead Act of 1862, which, along with the invention of barbed wire (patented in 1874) marked one of the new frontiers dragging the Old West into the modern age. This basic story, adapted from Jack Schaefer's 1946 novella, was inspired by the Johnson County War (1889-93), first fic-

tionalized in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902). It formed the basis for a number of key films in the genre, from the cataclysmic commercial failure Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980), to Clint Eastwood's rebooting of the genre in *Pale Rider* (1985) and Kevin Costner's twenty-first century retelling in *Open Range* (2003), but Stevens's *Shane* is the classic.

Schaefer's story was offered to Stevens at a time when he was riding high on the success of previous films such as *Woman of the Year* (1941), *Talk of the Town* (1942), and *A Place in the Sun* (1951), meaning he could have chosen any project as his next one. What partly drew him to *Shane* was Schaefer's framing of the story through the perspective of a child, which added a dimension that had hitherto been underutilized in the genre.[3] "Those are the kinds of films I like to see," stated Stevens in 1963, "—as singular as you can make the point of view" (qtd. in Fisher 28). However, it is a mistake to think that this singularity amounts to simplicity. After all, Stevens's films around this time reveal a director acutely attuned to the multiplicity of consciousness—consider the competing views in *A Place in the Sun*, from Montgomery Clift's riven hero to Shelley Winters's tragic working-class reject, all contextualized, of course, by Elizabeth Taylor's sweet-tempered society girl. While Stevens's camera often revealed his great affection for the stars of his postwar features, especially James Dean (*Giant* [1956]) and Montgomery Clift (although *A Place in the Sun* belongs—will always belong—to Elizabeth Taylor), the image of Alan Ladd smiling down with thick blond hair and sky blue eyes, framed so grandly by the Tetons, is made so iconic for the gaze of an adoring boy who *looks*.

Stevens said of his editing process that "sometimes we find really fine quality in a film by looking at it, looking at it, and then looking *back* at it" (qtd. in McGilligan & McBride 118), and it was only by pacing a scene, often with a long take, that he finally saw something that took his breath away. This is why Stevens screened his movies as he edited them, cutting and projecting different takes until he found what he was looking for. He also noted that he would never seek to move in and examine the "fine qualities" he found, thinking it important that the scene "draws the audience in to make an effort to see more. The audience must explore it, discover why there is this muted telling of some significant point. They're in a position where they can have a reverential look at something" (118). It is in this sense of taking a reverential look that this essay proposes to take a look at *Shane*. To do so, it follows a process Wittgenstein describes in *Philosophical Investigations* as *Übersicht*—usually translated as "overview," but which is perhaps best translated by the phrase "perspicuous representation." Wittgenstein meant for us to work towards a new kind of understanding by seeing

things afresh, by finding different ways of viewing the world (in this case, as I am taking it, the film world). It is about "seeing connexions," wrote Wittgenstein, "finding and inventing *intermediate cases*" (prop. 122, 49).

This is perhaps the idea that most inspired Stanley Cavell's project in *The World Viewed* (1971), in which he writes that "ours is an age, in which our philosophical grasp of the world fails to reach beyond our taking and holding views of it" (xxiii). The question is critical when looking at *Shane* because the framing of the story through the view of the young Joey ultimately led many critics to criticize *Shane* (and often Stevens's work more generally), especially since the 1970s—the "age" being referred to, incidentally, by Cavell in *The World Viewed*. This downgrading of the film was perhaps best exemplified by James Cortese's damning review in 1976, which accused *Shane* of having a sentimental and nostalgic view of the world. While his was by no means the first critical review,[4] Cortese argued that the "tactic," as he put it, of having Joey as the observer of the action, worked "to open up the possibility that the story is somehow contingent on a child's consciousness," thereby absolving itself from "charges against the immaturity of its [bourgeois] vision" (125); since, as we were all once children caught up in dreaming of the future, the film's chimeras shortly evaporate. The film is insubstantial, felt Cortese, because it gives licence to wallow in a wish-fulfillment fantasy that would not compromise one's political integrity. It is a nostalgic vision, he concluded, "to convince us of the importance of who we were and what we have become" (125), a myth centred on beings who are "strictly of the past" (131). Such a romantic vision is essentially ideological, hence apolitical: a mythic *fait accompli*.

However, a Cavellian reading argues that *Shane* stirs something in us—just as Shane's appearance to Joey stirs something in him. "Like dreams, certain moments from films viewed decades ago will nag as vividly as moments of childhood . . . which suggests that film awakens as much as it enfolds you" (*World* 17). This "vivid nagging" might be a call to insular abandonment of serious political concerns, or perhaps not; either way, it need not preclude serious thought. Cavell suggests as much in "What (Good) Is a Film Museum?", an essay criticizing what he saw as a prohibition against philosophizing about the *pleasure* of cinema, a prohibition not against seeing or talking about and judging movies, "but against thinking about them, abandoning oneself to them, including them in one's deliberations and conversation, as one would include the novels and poetry one cares most about" (108). This paper explores what can be thought of as fully *modern* moments in *Shane* that connect to others elsewhere in the genre; it explores those

moments as they connect to our own lives, forming a "perspicuous representation" gathering culture through this little boy's perspective, by turns precociously critical and naïvely sentimental (as charged). But overall, it invites us to take up this child's perspective and look again at Stevens's monumental film, which tackles some of the genre's most enduring riddles, presents us with characters and performances as complex as they are unforgettable, and frames its story in a way that seems to call us back, inducing us to look once again as it draws us in.

After all, as Stevens told his son, George Stevens Jr. (who worked on *Shane*—aged twenty-one—as an uncredited production assistant): "It's all about making sure the film bounces off that sheet and comes to life in the mind of the audience. What is a film outside the audience's mind?" (qtd. in Stevens, Jr. 218).

Sighting Shane

Fig. 1

Alan Ladd in the title role of *Shane* (George Stevens, Paramount, 1953). This and all other images in this essay are digital frame enlargements.

The film opens onto a typical scene: a farmer toiling on the land while his wife does household chores indoors and their young son plays at hunting with an unloaded rifle. When Shane rides in (seemingly from

the mountains), it is Joey who first sights him framed by the antlers of a deer, watching him all the way and informing his father (who simply replies, "Let him come"). After a long ride, the stranger accepts Starrett's offer to come onto their land for a drink, and as Joey gazes at him up close for the first time, a shot of Shane beaming down at him from his horse fills the screen from the child's low angle, a mountainous presence (fig. 1).

Murray Pomerance describes his first experience with stars onscreen in terms that connote something of the magic, even the transcendence of such an encounter:

> The first beings I saw onscreen were gargantuan, glimmering, happy (or at least striving for happiness), and unspeakably beautiful. If they vaguely resembled people I knew, their proportion as giants, the smoothness and harmony of their movements, speech, and song, the brave colorations and shapes of their garments, the exoticism of the spaces in which they moved—it all made them inhuman, unreal, phantasmal. (*Moment* 1)

This is almost a perfect description of the moment Alan Ladd handsomely smiles from his horse, his earthy buckskins contrasting with the blue sky (and Ladd's blue eyes). It was an introduction that made Alan Ladd seem like one of the "Big Men" of the genre—almost even a Pecos Bill figure (who famously lassoed a tornado)—despite being only five-foot-five.[5] However, it would be no less a mistake to put the difference between the reality of Alan Ladd and the phantasmal Shane down to ignorance of Ladd's real height than to think that the phantasmal nature of film can be resolved merely by understanding a thing or two about Griggs's cunning at hiding Ladd's height using camera angles, or his and Stevens's skillful camerawork in using shallow focal lengths to make the Tetons seem so much closer to the Starretts' homestead than they really were. For Pomerance, the film constructs a world, a world in which reality and invention touch, are no longer clearly distinguishable.

Cavell offers an interesting example, one with which Pomerance's description of the "gargantuan" beings onscreen chimes:

> A sight *is* an object (usually a very large object, like the Grand Canyon or Versailles . . .) what you see, when you sight something, is an object—anyway, not the sight of an object. (*World* 20)

For Cavell, Alan Ladd could not be a "sight" onscreen as such, but as Shane—smiling down from his horse—he approaches the magnificence of the Teton mountains behind him. It is as if—to paraphrase Cavell—Ladd was *too close* to the sight that is "Shane," this monumental being who so challenges the reality of little Joey Starrett as he messes around in his back yard with his small rifle, already sizing this new man up against his father. By comparison, Starrett, despite Heflin being taller and stockier than Ladd, seems world-weary, tired from labouring (unlike Shane, whose long ride seems only to have drawn from him a thirst easily slaked). Starrett's dirty workman's clothes mark him as a laborer whose daily duties demand a uniform, not the clothes of a dandy like Shane dressed in buckskins (later, when Starrett idly flicks through the *Sears, Roebuck & Co.* catalog while waiting for provisions in Grafton's store, he is almost certainly thinking about fashion for his wife, not himself).

While Joey first catches sight of Shane and briefly holds him "in his sights" (literally in the sights of his rifle), it is nonetheless *he* who is captured, because captivated, by this mysterious figure. Cavell writes:

> To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. (*World* 102)

This desire for the condition of viewing is exemplified in the "tenderfoot" narrator of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), who, "fresh from the east," is captivated by the larger-than-life cowboy who collects him from the station when he arrives in Medicine Bow, Wyoming.[6]

Reaction shots of Joey in rapt attention or pure wonderment occur frequently throughout *Shane*: whether he is clenching his hands and gritting his teeth as he watches his father and Shane heave a tree stump over, or biting into his candy cane at the precise moment Shane punches one of Ryker's men to finally knock him down in a bar brawl (Joey's crunching candy providing a sound match). Shortly after, Joey is shown grinning, enjoying the action as his father joins the melee. Shane is presented, like the many heroes he inspired, as the sui generis of gunslingers—a paradigmatic case. What the child and the tenderfoot share in these examples is a tendency to romanticise and see the world with soft eyes (unlike James Stewart's tenderfoot in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* [1962], who seems much closer to Starrett's fully invested position, with just as much at stake). With soft eyes they

Fig. 2

Brandon De Wilde with friend, spectators in the dark

establish a connection to the world through "having views of it." One might even call them ideal spectators. If ever there were an onscreen example of such dedication to the sights that cinema has to offer, it is here. But also, it is in taking such views that the world springs into being—that the film *has any sights at all*.

In this sense, Shane has struggled against the generic trends expected of him, attempting to break away from the empty and lonely life of the gunfighter (and failing to do so). As he finally gives in and becomes who he is, the film—and these diegetic viewers—are ready. In *Shane*, the transformation is subtle, since Joey has witnessed every step in Shane's attempt to break away from his destiny. As he changes from his sodbuster clothes back into his buckskins, ready for his final showdown with Wilson (Jack Palance), the moment is registered by Joey whose imagination had already intuited *this* Shane as connected to *that* Shane (the man he held so long in his sights). Stevens's camera seems to love Shane in the same sense described by Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, who wrote that an event in which someone special enters our lives is one of the most delicate things in the world, structured around the unique experiences of the individuals involved in it: "Loving those who are like this: when they enter a room they are not persons, characters or subjects, but an atmospheric variation, a change

of hue" (66). When he draws, shoots, and kills Wilson and Ryker, Shane cannot resist spinning his pistol twice around before re-holstering his "tool" with a flourish. It is this flair that marks him as the deadly dandy he always was, that glories in it. It is this Shane who effectively delegitimizes him as a farmer, since this is a man who belongs to the category of "sights" that must always remain—like the mountains—just out of our grasp.

Something Lacking

Consider a counterexample in John Wayne, who played characters that tended not to be admired in the same way that Wayne himself was adored by audiences, especially with respect to roles in which he played a substitute father figure. Indeed, his characters' relationships are ambivalent, hinged on uncertainty: in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), the antagonistic relationship between Ethan (Wayne) and Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) is undercut by Wayne's affectionate teasing of the youngster, just as Henry Hathaway's *True Grit* (1969) introduces an oafish Wayne whose coarse table manners initially disgust the newly orphaned Mattie (Kim Darby)—her admiration must be hard won. Both films center on the potential for Wayne to fail these youngsters, or, indeed, to bring ruin on them with his own violent inclinations (this latter is particularly emphasized by Ford at the end of *The Searchers*, when, in the moment prior to his finally embracing Natalie Wood, Wayne holds her aloft and we cannot be entirely sure he won't simply dash her brains out on the rocks). By contrast, it is his *certainty* about Shane that seems to unsettle Joey, as is most clearly suggested in the scene when he asks his mother if it is okay to love Shane (almost) as much as he loves Pa, but also in his constant comparing of Shane to his father, right up to the final wavering note that seems to enter Joey's voice as he calls for Shane to "come back!" one last time at the very end of the film. This final line raises a question about precisely what Joey's need for Shane is, given the stable presence of his powerful, honorable, and utterly devoted father. After all, only a child would issue such a direct (and open) provocation to his father.

Stevens constructs the opening scene as a "summoning" of sorts: framed by the antlers of a deer he pretends to shoot (imagining the deer is Ryker), Joey seems to will Shane's arrival, his aimless playing clearly stoking the fires of his imagination.[7] As Bob Baker puts it, "Shane is a little boy's fantasy, imagined off a glimpsed passing stranger who *didn't* stop for a drink of water" (216, emphasis added). The idea lends an Oedipal dimension to the drama, given that Joey's fantasiz-

ing a figure to rival his father is compounded by his mother's affection for Shane, raising the spectre of a double threat to Joe: to be ousted as a father and cuckolded as a husband. The threat seems obviously unfair, a point reinforced by the presence of Van Heflin, whose image as a strong, dependable, even desirable leading man had already been well-established in such films as Lewis Milestone's *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946).[8] Yet, while Starrett is never quite cuckolded by Shane (unlike Michael Moriarty's Hull in *Pale Rider*), one of the thinly concealed tensions in Stevens's drama concerns an unspoken desire that seems to pass between Shane and Marian, especially because of the furtive glances they cast at one another, culminating in the July 4th dance where they step lively while Starrett, who can't dance, can only watch on with a dumb, awkward grin. Starrett is clearly father and husband enough for Joey and Marian, yet Shane is presented paradoxically as both a necessary supplement and unwanted excess in the Starrett family dynamic.

For Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Marian's attraction to Shane is not only kept secret by her—oddly, in that she rarely keeps her thoughts to herself. At least Arthur does incredible work at telegraphing to *us* what she is thinking, something she doubtless learned from a career spent working in comedy (she made two for Stevens: *The Talk of the Town* and *The More the Merrier* [1943]). Marian's feelings for Shane constitute a family secret, argues Bell-Metereau, since Starrett reacts with, as she puts it, "admiration": Shane's "hidden life is an essential part of his appeal for everyone in the Starrett family. Silence is what allows each member to participate secretly in the fantasy world that Shane represents" (94). If not the secret itself, then the anxiety it causes finds its expression in these key moments of ambiguity over what is appropriate with respect to Shane's place. Bell-Metereau points out that early 1950s films saw this unspoken illicit love represented in a number of examples in which secrecy formed a crucial part of the dramatic thrust.

The key question to ask is why, given that this is *Joey's fantasy* (not Marian's), Shane is discussed as a sexual being at all? Attention has been drawn to the tree stump scene in which Shane goes shirtless for the final effort, while Joe remains conspicuously fully clothed. The moment emphasizes Ladd's hairless, muscular body glistening with sweat and Marian and Joey watching the men work. However, while the shot might be read as sexualizing Ladd, it is not clear from the look on Marian's face that she is gazing at him in this way—of course she might be, but since the scene identifies with Joey's view its primary function for Stevens seems to reside elsewhere. Lee Clark Mitchell writes that the western invites us to gaze at men's bodies as confirmation of their masculinity, of their status as men, and that it was the literary western

that "invented a dream man . . . and then placed him prominently as the target of *all eyes*" (161, emphasis added). Mitchell draws attention to Owen Wister's description of the Virginian as a man who moved with "the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin" (11), a description echoed when Joe declares that "sometimes there ain't nuthin' will do but your own sweat and muscle." Yet his "sweat and muscle" remains covered, while Shane's is on display for all to see, that is to witness. In Wister's text the narrator is awed by the "notable sight" of the Virginian lassoing a stubborn pony no other cowboy is able to capture, an achievement that codes him as a man who "knows his business" (11).[9] And this is how the scene in *Shane* really plays; it is the moment Shane demonstrates that he is not just a showman, but a man capable of stopping the unstoppable, moving the immovable. It is crucial for Stevens that Shane not be just a dream man in Joey's imagination, but a man of flesh and blood, and muscle.

Violent Fantasies

What is clear is that much of Joey's play acting, his fooling around in the yard, goes beyond mere child's play to alleviate boredom. Whether he is sneaking around pretending to shoot Ryker with his unloaded gun, or else goading his father about whether he could beat Shane in a fight, or probing Shane about how he would deal with trespassers (neither man takes the boy's bait), Joey's play is charged with passionate fantasy. In the psychoanalytic sense, it is the kind of play whose aim is to realize (in a mediated way) desires protected from "reality." Joey's desires are violent ones—they hinge on killing Ryker (that is, on making the bogeyman go away).

In such moments, Joey imagines himself as Shane: not Shane-as-proxy but Joey-*become*-Shane (and Shane-as-gunslinger, not Shane-as-sodbuster). After all, despite being a boy with what seems to be a simple—even at times a dull—life on the farm playing with the deer, Joey knows about gunslingers. While Stevens never shows us where he gets this idea (dime novels, for example), his obsession with and understanding of who Shane is, what he can do, and the mystery surrounding his gun (his "six-shooter," as Joey knowingly calls it) confirm that the image of the gunslinger is as embedded in his mind as it is in ours. Thus his desire to see Shane act, coupled with his dislike for the men who disturb the farm and weigh so heavily on his father's mind, gives rise to a thought about his own acting in this way. Joey does not, of course, have any real connection to the consequences of this imagined "violence," as seems clear when Stevens shifts the mood following

the introduction of Wilson later on in the film. However, his childish imaginings are exposed in the scene in which Ryker takes his hired gunslinger Wilson to the Starrett's homestead in one last attempt to convince the farmer to sell his claim. The scene is most often regarded for the balletic way Wilson and Shane wordlessly size one another up as the one mirrors the other's every move, never breaking eye contact (when Wilson dismounts his horse he does so in a single, beautifully arcing motion).[10] However, the grace and majesty with which Wilson and Shane "dance" with one another is contrasted with the dialogue and with a single gesture by Ryker that confronts Joey with his own gunslinging fantasies.

The scene introduces a complexity to the character of Ryker, who (at least briefly) dispels any sense of his being easily dismissed as a simple "fascist," despite Edward Countryman and Evonne von Heussen-Countryman's focus on the homonym "Ryker—Reicher."[11] When Ryker makes his case (knowing that his next play will be to unleash Wilson), he finds Starrett unmoved. "We're in the right," Starrett claims, prompting a surprisingly sympathetic reaction from Ryker, who makes a powerful, if ultimately unconvincing, claim:

> Right? *You* in the right? Look son, when I come to this country, you weren't much older than your boy there [indicating Joey]. We had rough times. Me and other men that are mostly dead now. I got a bad shoulder yet from a Cheyenne arrowhead. We *made* this country, we found it and we made it, with blood and empty bellies. . . . We made a safe range out of this. Then people move in who never had to raw-hide it through the old days. You say we have no right to the range? The men that did the work and ran the risks have no rights?!

It is one of the most compelling defences ever put into the mouth of a screen villain, and puts flesh on the bones of Meyer's antagonist, as well as giving his performance an edge that will be sharpened when the stakes are raised later in the film. Indeed, one might contrast this with his brilliantly loathsome performance as corrupt cop Harry Kello in Alexander Mackendrick's *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), whose lack of any redeeming qualities is emphasized by the fact that even Sidney Falco—Tony Curtis's morally unscrupulous newspaperman—finds doing business with him a new low. Meyer's performance here, by contrast, along with the dialogue written by Guthrie (and Stevens), *almost* makes Ryker's demands seem reasonable, despite his flawed logic ("There were trappers here and Indian traders here long before you showed up," Starrett points out). Ryker's argument is essentially a

claim on his right to the open range, a right he feels he has already paid for, even one he is owed.

The flaw in his view of the open range emerges in his inconsistent use of the word "right," which varies from the sense of *doing* right to *being* in the right (that is, *having* rights because of who he is). His fascistic "turn," then, comes in the next scene when he uses the word "right" to advise Wilson on how to gun down one of the homesteaders, emphasizing the importance of making it "look right" to Grafton (to *look*, and not be right). Starrett, of course, already anticipates this ("You think you've got the right to say that nobody else has got any"), but the shifting register points to Ryker's manipulation of the way things appear, playing into the reading of the film as having multiple layers and hidden meanings, motivations not always clearly stated, as Bell-Metereau claims.

But even before we get to Ryker's slippery use of language, he does something in that earlier scene with the Starretts that exposes Joey to his own violent imagining. Frustrated by Starrett's stubbornness, Ryker continues talking as though he were being unfairly backed into a corner ("You don't give a man much choice, do you Starrett?"). Then, moving beyond Starrett and Marian to the back of the cart where Joey is sitting, Ryker addresses the boy directly: "How do you feel about it, son? Wouldn't you like to go partners with me? I don't want trouble with your father. We don't want anyone to get hurt. . . . How about it, son?"

While Meyer plays the scene like a benevolent patriarch, giving us no sense that he is actually threatening anyone, the implication is made clear by Stevens's framing of the shot—in which Ryker paternally holds Joey's leg, Meyer and De Wilde in a two-shot—and in the way Joey reacts by lowering his gaze to the floor and eventually scampering to bury his face in his parents' laps (fig. 3). It is the only time in the film that Joey behaves in this way. After all, this is a boy who spends the majority of his time dashing about with his chest thrust out, and who, by all accounts, was full of brio on and off-set. Like De Wilde, Joey has a "slightly shrill, exceptionally articulate voice," as Pomerance put it, "the voice that never stops questioning, the voice that can never be told enough" ("Brandon De Wilde" 2). It is a voice silenced by Ryker, and that silence is deafening.

However, Joey reacts this way not simply because he is afraid (this is, after all, a boy as little fazed by a bar brawl as by a deadly shootout), but because he finds himself no longer in the role of an onlooker, but one who is included *in the "picture,"* because Ryker moves to him, places a hand on his thigh, and then says (addressing him as "son"), "How do *you* feel?" and then, "Wouldn't *you* like to go partners . . ." Any threat implied by Ryker becomes conditional on *Joey's* consent, essentially

Fig. 3

Ryker (Emile Meyer) working to persuade Joey

raising him to the role of an authority. In this gesture, Joey's fantasy world is exposed. What Ryker does not know—cannot know—is that Joey's fantasizing of Shane renders this a confrontation with his innermost desires, with the "bad man" of his imagination; there can be nothing more terrifying than such a confrontation, especially for a ten-year-old boy not used to secrecy, let alone the spilling of secrets.[12]

It is the only moment in the film in which Joey ceases to look with fearless abandon, with that enquiring mind thirsty to see more, and it is, I argue, a psychological one in which Joey's perspective on the world is interrogated and, at least momentarily, fails. It is oedipal for the way Ryker's line, "I don't want trouble with your father" runs into "We don't want anyone to get hurt," clearly implying that the "anyone" in that formulation is the father. Stevens uses the moment to foreshadow a change in the general tone of the film—away from the lighter, swashbuckling romance of the first half, with its tree stump wrestling and (relatively) harmless bar brawl, to a darkening of the way the rest of the drama is to be framed.

A Picture

Ryker's line, "We don't want anyone to get hurt" is one that Stevens repeated in an interview with Joe Hyams in 1953 when, asked why he made *Shane*, he recalled witnessing some neighborhood kids playing cowboys with toy guns. "What interested [Stevens] most was the way they 'bang banged' indiscriminately at each other with their toy guns" but refused to fall down "dead," since: "guns don't hurt."[13] Stevens felt this was a lesson the kids learned from the westerns in which shooting is shown for "orchestration purposes" (Hyams 10). For Stevens, it was important that the only shooting in *Shane* would be there to "define a gun shot, which for our purposes is a holocaust" (qtd. in Hyams 10). The point is most clearly registered in the moment Wilson shoots one of the homesteaders, Frank "Stonewall" Torrey (Elisha Cook, Jr.), after baiting him into drawing his pistol to settle a point of honor. It remains one of the most chilling killings in movie history, and Stevens's use of the word "holocaust" is hardly casual: having been part of the American liberation of the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau, he had had the image of dead bodies in the mud seared into his mind, and for him it caused a "profound adjustment" in his thinking (qtd. in McGilligan & McBride 114). It is this image that confronts us when, having been violently propelled backwards by the force of Wilson's shot, Torrey lies abjectly in the slick mud.[14] Stephen Prince has noted that Torrey's death was the first time a shooting had been depicted with such violence onscreen: since the heyday of the Production Code, gunshots had been signalled chiefly by holes in or blood stains on the actor's costume (238). Here, the shock of Torrey's death affects the viewer in a manner analogous to Joey's confrontation with Ryker: ours is a confrontation with the horror of gunslinging (for which we, at least in part, came to this film). With this explosively shocking moment of discriminating violence, the indiscriminate "bang-banging" of western gunplay is finally confronted with the reality of cold-blooded murder.

The moment is exacerbated by the contrast between this "hunk of nothing" in the mud, as Stevens put it (qtd. in Hyams 11) and the smirking face of Wilson, which seems to confirm Michel Mourlet's description of Jack Palance as the embodiment of cinematic violence. He is a screen hero, writes Mourlet, "both cruel and noble, elegant and manly, a hero who reconciles strength with beauty (or, in Palance's case, a splendidly animal ugliness)." In his very being, Palance represents the "perfection of a lordly race, a hero made to conquer, made to portend or to experience the joys of the world" (233). He is an example of Baudelaire's definition of the dandy as one whose appearance and elegance are "symbols of the aristocratic superiority of his personality"

(qtd. Cavell, *World* 55). Wilson's smirk signals a much clearer divide between good and evil than we had seen between Starrett and Ryker,[15] a divide crucial for Stevens because it more overtly delineates the moral distinction (in contrast to the earlier scene with Ryker) necessary to draw Shane back to his more elemental way of being; Wilson forces the issue, begging Shane to "prove" his own aristocratic superiority.

Yet the moment the worldview of *Shane* darkens is interesting to me for the effect it has on a minor figure whose gaze, I would like to argue, momentarily takes over from Joey's as the framing gesture for this part of the film. The figure is Chris Calloway, a young man in Ryker's employ, most famous for taunting Shane in the earlier scene that sparked the bar brawl that so delighted Joey (and left Chris bloodied and beaten, but still allied to Ryker). Following Torrey's death, Chris's picture of the world is deeply affected as he undergoes a total change of heart.

As played by Ben Johnson—who'd mainly been playing stock characters before Stevens offered him this role—Chris is clearly torn between a desire to please Ryker, whose influence has inured him to the injustices in which he is complicit, and his better nature. When Chris goaded Shane at Grafton's shortly after the latter had changed out of his buckskins into his new "sodbuster" threads, he revealed himself as a naïve youngster eager to impress and show off in front of his drunken pals. Stevens leaves us in no doubt that Shane could have bested Chris, and so it is Shane's deep temperament, not a failure of his manliness, that makes him "show yellow." However, the complexity of Chris's character does not really come through until Torrey's funeral, during which it is Chris's perspective—not Joey's—that frames the scene. Before Stevens cuts to the cemetery up on the hill overlooking the town, he focuses on Chris who lowers his gaze to the ground (in fact, it is more precisely a sideways glance at Wilson, if one considers the frame composition of the previous shot). This look communicates both his disgust at Wilson but also his shame at being part of Ryker's outfit. Chris wrings his hands as he looks from Wilson to the funeral taking place up on the hill. It is clear he feels a strong urge to join the homesteaders, that his true place is with them (not beside Wilson, who isn't really "with" anybody).

The shot marks a key point of transition for Chris, who is clearly disturbed by the sound of the mourners singing "Abide with Me," carried down the hill on the wind, in a sombre reprise of their 4th of July rendition. The look on his face forms a powerful counter to Wilson's smirk (fig. 4). It is a look which further confirms that the performances and direction in this movie combine to explore nuances of moral questioning through minor moments, gestures, looks, and camera framing/

Fig. 4

Chris (Ben Johnson) isn't sure of his loyalties.

editing.[16] Also, by invoking that song and the 4th, the film aligns Chris with a true yeoman American spirit, rather than a false one.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein observed that one of the key problems with philosophy was its tendency to assert something about the world that makes a claim about how things *are*. "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it" (prop. 114, 48), by which he means to critique the sense that philosophy is fixed, and worse: an activity that seeks to fix the world even more deeply, resisting a shift in our thinking. To understand this proposition, I think we need to recall that Wittgenstein opens *Philosophical Investigations* with that famous Augustine quote about the way children learn by looking up at their elders who teach them to see the world by pointing to objects and mouthing the corresponding sounds to name them: hence, the color red as exemplified by pointing to red things, apples by holding up fruit, numbers by counting. It is easy to see how this can be perverted (masculinity as defined by provoking a quarrel, justice by holding up a whip, etc.). The intention with this mode of learning is, reflected Augustine, to reveal "the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses

our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something." The laying of such a ground for describing the world is, Wittgenstein understands by this example, a basis for seeing and understanding it, too, hence his interest in Augustine's concluding remark that "after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires" (qtd. in Wittgenstein, prop. 1, 2).

What Chris is fighting against is his strong framing of the world by elders who have co-opted (and corrupted) his ability to form his own desires. "A *picture* held us captive," wrote Wittgenstein, "and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (prop. 115, 48). Chris is so deeply affected by the violent death of Torrey that he finds his picture of the world is one that must be changed through an effort of will. It is a picture dominated by the language of Ryker and his men, who use words in a way that Wilson does not: despite the odd quip, Wilson is a man who slinks and glides his way through the film, who makes putting on his gloves before he kills seem like part of a dance routine. Chris, by contrast, is clearly a man who wants to talk—hence, Shane's oft-(mis)quoted line "You speakin' to me?" For Stanley Cavell, the point of Wittgenstein's "investigations" is to show that the world is not given, but must be described, and in describing we in part do the work of defining and shaping it. For Chris, speakin' with words that he has attained and which, when spoken by him must elicit an appreciative reaction from his pals in order to corroborate his correct use of them, the shift in his thinking requires a shift in the way he speaks.

Does this not go to the very heart of Stevens's *Shane*? When Chris warns Shane of Ryker's intention to betray Starrett, simply stating that he is "quittin' Ryker," he has a grim, wearied expression on his face. However, when Shane holds out his hand and smiles at him, Chris beams back. Shane's smile does more than offer a different corroborative gaze for Chris; it is a form of acceptance, a stable foundation on which to build anew. It contrasts with Wilson's smirk, which conveys no such confirmation of the world—he is, after all, not interested in acolytes in this town, let alone nurturing the talents of others. Wilson's smirk acknowledges only a private joke that cannot be communicated, fueled by what Baudelaire called the dandy's "hidden fire," his ruling passion (a fire that, when unleashed, Stevens constructs as holocaust). When Shane smiles at Chris in Starrett's barn, he makes an offer: if Shane will take care of Wilson, Chris must take care of the Starretts by taking his place on the farm. The reciprocity of the moment is more explicitly conveyed in Schaefer's novella, but here Stevens leaves it to the gestures: an offering smile, a promissory handshake.

What Chris learns is that the world is not given, is not based on a masculine code upheld only by reactive sniggers and careless words; rather, it depends on facing up to and placing faith in community not individualism. He must not only quit Ryker, but state as much, and quitting Ryker means quitting his understanding of what it means, to Ryker and to the men who stand with Ryker, to be a man. The world is not given but must be *attained* in our thoughts, actions, and words. And once attained, it must by cultivated and cared for.

The Measure of Shane

Fig. 5

A shooting lesson

This sense of "taking care" is emphasized in the shooting demonstration scene. It is telling that Shane doesn't just say to Joey, "Hey, watch this," before drawing his pistol and blasting the little white rock. Rather, Shane bends to Joey's level and adjusts his belt, elevating the demonstration to a proper lesson—holster positioning, discussion of various styles, relative importance of posture, etc (fig. 5). The usually impatient and ranging boy is motionless in this moment, his attention rapt as long as Shane is at his level, revealing these precious secrets

(which of course spills into a discussion of the various gunslingers from Shane's past).

Shane is giving more than a demonstration. It is an invitation "behind the scenes," a lesson as much about technique and stance as about attitude and manner. More, perhaps: Shane is teaching Joey about what it means to take care of himself—not just in the sense of defending himself, but of nurturing his view of the world, taking care to become the kind of man he wishes to be. (Contrast the scene in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* where John Wayne—to make a point about James Stewart's being unsuited to gunplay—showers him with paint to put him in his place.)

Pomerance (2014) points out that such an onscreen relationship was rare for Brandon De Wilde, who, despite often playing young boys who looked up to older role models for guidance on how to become a man, tended to find those figures lacking. Pomerance calls these "anti-Shane" films for the way De Wilde's yearning, probing youths are (often tragically) let down by older siblings who betray his trust. (It is striking, Pomerance notes, that De Wilde never seemed to play the older sibling—always younger, or an only child, always looking up.) There is never any suggestion that other children—at least his own age—live in Joey's town, hence Shane becomes, in a final twist of his familial role-playing, like an older sibling. Contrast this with two of De Wilde's memorable "anti-Shane" films: John Frankenheimer's *All Fall Down* (1962), in which De Wilde plays opposite Warren Beatty as his wayward older brother; and Martin Ritt's *Hud* (1963), in which he played the teenage nephew of a local hell-raiser (with Paul Newman in the title role). Both films dismantle De Wilde's naïve idolizing of role models to bring him to the point in which he must recognize the necessity of not only standing on his own in the world but shaking off the captivating effect of his older siblings. What De Wilde's characters realize, in both films, is that they are caught up in someone else's dream, fixed in the light of those unfit to mentor. Indeed, part of the tragedy of *Hud* and *All Fall Down* is the silencing of that inquisitive voice, that passion for life. This is notwithstanding the glimmer of defiance we see in the final image of De Wilde at the end of both of these movies—somehow we know he will survive, even thrive (unlike the Beatty and Newman characters, who seem lost), but at what cost to his confidence?

Shane, by contrast, understands that the future belongs to Joey. He sees in this boy the "man" who will "make his mark someday," just as his smile recognizes Chris's change of heart. In this he continues to resist that part of the dandy that hides its fire. Hence, when Cavell argues that Shane ultimately only demonstrates that he is pinned to his fate—"he recognizes that he cannot forgo his mark of mastery, his taste

for distinction, the privilege in his autonomy" (*World* 58)—it seems important to add the qualification that in withdrawing this autonomy from the town, he enables Joey and Chris to take up the challenge of growing up "straight." Shane understands he is a kind that has "lived too long," as he himself puts it, a kind whose "days are over," but Stevens wants this message about the past to be complemented by an image of the future, and as Shane rides off Joey's face fills the screen as Stevens dissolves to the mountains (with Shane, slumped in his saddle, riding through the cemetery presumably to die). Shane won't come back, but then he doesn't need to. So many westerns end with the exclusion of the gunslinger from a community (John Wayne left alone on the porch in *The Searchers*), or else of the rejection of the community by the gunslinger (Wayne and Claire Trevor riding off in *Stagecoach*; Gary Cooper tossing his tin star in the dust before leaving with Grace Kelly in *High Noon*). For Cavell, Wayne's self-effacement in *Liberty Valence* establishes James Stewart's authority, but *Shane* is a film whose message is really about *generativity*.

This is why Patrick McGee argues that, in one sense, Shane *always* comes back, "because he represents the possibility of self-transformation," and the name for that transformation is "Shane," not as a signifier of the holocaust of death, but as a signifier for the future, yet another signifier for which is, writes McGee, simply "mommy" (243), the giver of life. After all, children don't feel nostalgia and sentimentality; they don't look back, but up. The "sight" of Shane is one that calls for the gaze of the young boy who will frame his own existence against the measure of something else, without ever feeling that he will fail to measure up. Only then will he come to be the measure of himself. This is the secret passion that Shane passes to Joey, and acknowledges in Chris. The ambiguities and uncertainties in the film, over which Joey pores in his ongoing search for answers to the mysteries of the world, make sense only in the context of his disbelief at Ernie Wright's accusation that Shane "showed yellow" against Chris in the bar, his outrage at Shane's ungentlemanly use of his pistol to knock his father unconscious during their fistfight (an offence far greater than his father's defeat), and the full meaning of his mother's warning not to "get to liking Shane too much." Michael Coyne suggests that this very adult knowledge is what appears to dawn on Joey's face as he realizes Shane is not coming back in that final shot. It is a "sudden, curious expression," notes he, and "in that moment Joey loses both his boyhood hero and his childhood innocence" (75), understanding, as he seems to, that his own words to Shane, "Mother wants you. I know she does," has exposed another truth.

The final moment of *Shane* thereby marks the curious reappearance of the secret, a secret that seems to be grasped only at the moment Joey recognizes (really, truly) that Shane is *gone*, and yet, in a different sense, remains. It is an idea that has appeared in a number of films that echo it, of children embracing dying fathers whose departures mark the rite of passage from father to son, and the father's rebirth as a symbol of virtue: the heart-breaking final scene of John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), in which the young Roddy McDowall refuses to let go, to the climactic scene in *Road to Perdition* (2002), in which Tyler Hoechlin clutches on to his father and repeats over and over again, "Pa?" Both of these films end with a voiceover narration in which the deceased father is immortalized—"Men like my father cannot die" (*How Green*); "He was my father" (*Perdition*)—lines that seem to echo Schaefer's final sentence in *Shane*: "He was the man who rode into our little valley out of the heart of the great glowing West and when his work was done rode back whence he had come and he was Shane" (159). In Stevens's film, all is communicated through the look on De Wilde's face, in close-up as the shot dissolves to the mountains and Shane rides off.[17] It is an answer to T. K. Whipple, who complained in 1943 that

> all America lies at the end of the wilderness road, and our past is not a dead past but still lives in us; thus the question is momentous. But it has not been answered. Our forebears had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live; and what they lived, we dream. That is why our western story still holds us, however ineptly told. (65)

This final shot of Joey dissolving into Shane/the mountains marks the nexus between dream and lived reality; it is a call not only to take up that dream but to carry it forward, to let it guide one's actions. And Stevens tells the story masterfully.

Conclusion

In addition to shooting comedies, Stevens cut his teeth at the Hal Roach Studios making silent westerns, several set in Wyoming (like *The Devil Horse* [1926]).[18] His fondness for these movies was clearly charged by some sense of a child's vision of the West and the "Big Men" who shaped it: "When I was a kid cameraman, the director of a Western

was usually a western guy who could ride and do all those things . . . they were good men and the tradition was such that they wanted to be rugged, responsible. They had integrity" (qtd. in Moss 17). This "kid" cameraman was born in California to an actor father who took him out of formal education to tour around with his stock theatre company, and throughout his career, Stevens recollected his time in the presence of those brilliant performers, drawing on his "pretty keen" childhood memories, coupled with his father reciting to him "the saga of their greatness" (qtd. in Soanes 3). Such memories developed in the young Stevens a strong imagination coupled with an ability to understand the power of great storytelling. It was his education, as Marilyn Ann Moss puts it, one that armed the young Stevens "with a critical vocabulary, a knowledge of the theatre and storytelling, and an ability to understand what might compel an audience and what might not" (9).

This essay has focused on Joey because it is, for me, this little boy's perspective that elevates *Shane* to a masterpiece, and any suggestion that Joey's framing of the film renders it simplistically naïve or sentimental misses the point that this was Stevens's quintessential subject position. As a boy looking up from the wings at his father bringing drama to life onstage, Stevens learned that it was in taking such views, to return once more to Cavell, that worlds could be crafted, as well as audiences. "The film *is* the audience," Stevens later said, perhaps with his childhood experiences in mind:

> Time and again you sit in a room alone, and something is up there on the screen that can mean nothing. And in comes another, and there's a community of interaction, awareness that another mind is in contact with the screen . . . one among others brings [the movie] to life. The audience *is* the film. (qtd. in Moss 3)

Whether we are preserved or devoured (as Cavell warned) by this process, we cannot deny that when we are watching a film in this way we form part of a community delighting in and sharing a picture of the world. Stevens was not just another studio director who efficiently (or not!) put together big budget films, but someone who thought deeply about how those pictures might capture something essential about the human condition. He once joked that directing *Shane* was like having "a Grand Central Station atmosphere around you . . . and in all that wilderness of people and machinery perhaps the only thing you are trying to record is a small boy, crying goodbye" (qtd. in Boyle 14). Given that in them we find a world full of hidden complexities concentrated in a singular point of view that refuses both resolution and collapse, these

are not small gestures but enormous ones. Ultimately, *Shane* invites us to reflect on the way a child's picturing the world means, at least partly, seeing ourselves as part of that picture.

Notes

1. See Dick 155.

2. That the film won so few of its nominations is offset by the fact that westerns generally were not well regarded by the Academy. Shane was one of the first westerns (along with *High Noon* [1952] and *The Ox-Bow Incident* [1943]) to be nominated for Best Picture. (Stevens was also awarded the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award at this ceremony.)

3. Perhaps with the exception of child actor Bobby Nelson, who starred in around twenty-eight westerns from 1926 (aged four years old) to 1937 (aged nine), and also made numerous shorts in the genre for the "Pioneer Kid" series (beginning with *The Boy and a Bad Man*, [1929]). Many of these screen credits—particularly in his early career—were directed by his father, Jack Nelson, who also introduced him to acting.

4. In his famous early study of the western (1954), Robert Warshow disparaged *Shane* for its "aestheticizing tendency," while Andrew Sarris (1968) and André Bazin (1971) criticized its self-mythologizing over political engagement (see Day 105). V. F. Perkins (1962), who disliked Stevens generally, claimed he "victimises his audience as unscrupulously as anyone" (qtd. in Day 105)!

5. A marked contrast with other western heroes of the time—Gary Cooper, Lee Marvin, and James Stewart (all 6ft. 2ins), and, of course, John Wayne (at 6ft. 3ins).

6. The chapter is aptly titled "Enter the Man," and it is no coincidence that the pilot episode of *The Lone Ranger* was titled "Enter the Lone Ranger" (1949). In fact, numerous westerns stood on the shoulders of *Shane* in depicting the entrance of the hero through the eyes of an adoring child or tenderfoot (usually from the East). One particularly striking example of the latter is W. W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek) in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), whose desire to encounter the violent gunslinger of his romantic imagination leads him to stare open-mouthed at Eastwood's Bill Munny when he single-handedly disposes of the bad guys during the film's climax. When Munny makes a remark about how lucky he is at "killin' folks," Beauchamp lets out a gasp (a sigh, even) of pleasure that recalls Joey watching Shane beat the men who outnumbered him in Grafton's saloon.

7. Another point of comparison: when Eastwood reimagines the scene in his *Shane* remake, *Pale Rider*, the moment is unambiguously coded as a summoning: a young woman, Megan (Sydney Penny), buries her murdered dog and calls for a miracle (Eastwood's "Preacher" appears shortly thereafter to save their homestead). While the scene recalls Shane's arrival, Megan's father *is* an absence in her life, notwithstanding her mother's partner, who somehow struggles to fulfill the paternal function.

8. Although in his later career, a more repugnant side to Heflin's performance emerged in such films as Martin Ritt's *Five Branded Women* (1960).

9. The moment is recapitulated by an aging cowboy (Lee Marvin) in *Monte Walsh* (1970) as the *re*confirmation of masculinity.

10. This moment is echoed at the end of the scene when Wilson remounts his horse following their standoff. In fact, Stevens runs the footage of Palance dismounting his horse in reverse, thereby giving Wilson's horse-mount the same graceful, even majestic upward arc that, besides looking incredible on film, demonstrates Wilson's control and concentration (and enables him to maintain that eye contact with Shane)—Stevens learned this technique shooting comedies with Laurel and Hardy through the late 1920s and early '30s.

11. Guthrie and Stevens renamed Schaefer's villainous "Fletcher," meaning arrow-maker (and hence connoting the danger of the West's Indian past), as "Ryker," which they read as a play on "Reicher" (17).

12. Or, as Freud put it, "If what they long for the most intensely in their phantasies is presented to them in reality, they none the less flee from it" (110).

13. One perhaps thinks of a small moment in Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*, in which Marshall Will Kane (Gary Cooper) is surprised by a group of young children dramatizing a shoot-out, one of whom (Lee Aaker) shouts "Bang! bang!—you're dead, Kane," before being startled by bumping into him in real life.

14. Stevens achieved the effect by rigging Elisha Cook Jr. to a pulley, a technique he'd learned early on in his career working in comedy with Laurel and Hardy. One might compare the way Kevin Costner recapitulates this moment in the execution at the beginning of the final shootout in *Open Range* (2003).

15. Indeed, when his character engages in cheap parlour tricks in *The Silver Chalice* (1954)—one of which includes him "decapitating" Virginia Mayo (before magically "restoring" her)—the added menace brought to the role, simply because of Palance's sneer as he performs the trick, is palpable. One might also point to Palance's performances in Douglas Sirk's *Sign of the Pagan* (1954) and Robert Aldrich's *The Big Knife* (1955), both around the time he filmed *Shane*.

16. A counterpart to this look on Chris's face can perhaps be found in William A. Wellman's focus on the face of William Eythe during the lynching scene in *The Ox-Bow Incident*. The scene, which pits Eythe's character against his tyrannical father, explores Eythe's moral wrangling entirely through his face and gestures as he similarly wrestles with his place in the drama.

17. Murray Pomerance notes that Brandon de Wilde presents himself in his films as "the eager and loyal young man looking—or at least desiring to look—to a father figure or other masculine idol with adulation and wonder," but that in doing so, he established "a presence . . . that became iconic" (*The Eyes Have It* 172).

18. It was during this time that he first encountered Wister's novel, working as a camera assistant on an early adaptation of *The Virginian* (1923).

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